DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 133 306 SP 010 693

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TITLE Criticisms of Segal's Interpretation of the Ancient Greek Pentathlon.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Bi-Annual Canadian Symposium for the Study of the History of Sport and Physical Education (3rd, Halifax, Nova Scotia, August 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ancient History; Archaeology; *Athletes; *Athletics; Games; *Greek Civilization; *Physical Education; Running; Sportsmanship
IDENTIFIERS Discus; Javelin; Jumping; *Pentathlon; Wrestling

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ancient Greek pentathlon as it was conducted during the Olympic games. The pentathlon was comprised of five sub-exercises: (1) the jump; (2) the discus throw; (3) the javelin throw; (4) the stade run; and (5) wrestling. Using scholarship in the fields of archaeology, ancient poetry and legends, and pictorial evidence such as paintings on vases, the author disputes some of the findings of other scholars on this subject, particularly those of Erich Segal of Yale University. A bibliography accompanies the paper. (JD)

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CRITICISMS OF SEGAL'S INTERPRETATION OF THE ANCIENT GREEK PENTATHLON

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In the late 8th Century B.C. post-Mycenean Greeks added the pentathlon event to the oldest and, at that time, the only existing Crown festival--the games at Olympia.* The ancient pentathlon, comprised of five sub-exercises, remained a part of the Greek athletic festival scene almost until the virtual demise of organized sport in antiquity, some 400 years after the birth of Christ.

Knowledge and understanding of the pentathlon event, left to modern man by the ancient Greeks, is both sketchy and inconclusive at best. Research efforts on reconstructing the pentathlon in antiquity underscore the fact that the literary evidence pertinent to the event is sparse indeed. Archaeological findings and subsequent interpretation have only slightly enhanced our knowledge over that gained from primary literary sources. Compounding the entire dilemma is the fact that few contemporary writers on the subject have seen fit to superimpose their research efforts on the exhaustive and excellent work already done on the subject of the pentathlon by such scholars as Gardiner, Harris, Juthner, Krause, Ebert, Robinson, etc. Most contemporary contributions to the unraveling of the mysteries of the pentathlon appear as parts of works produced for popular consumption and, hence, are underscored by economic rather than scholarship motive. Such works suffer greatly from lack of penetrating investigation and contribute very little

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*A paper presented at the 3rd Bi-Annual Canadian Symposium for the study of the History of Sport and Physical Education, Halifax, Nova Scotia, August 1974.

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to a true mosaic of our ancient sporting heritage. Even the survey histories of sport and physical education, such as those produced by Leonard, Rice, VanDalen and Bennett, Weston, Forbes, etc., are conspicuous, not for what they have to report on the ancient pentathlon, but rather for what they have left unsaid.

It is the purpose of this paper to provide the reader (and viewer) with a brief review of the most valid interpretations of the ancient event, as well as to draw attention to some of the popular but unfounded explanations. Also, the author wishes to offer his own conclusions, arrived at by coupling the collective findings of the most in-depth scholars on the subject with his own research and intuitive reaction. By way of acquainting those assembled with a framework of reference as to the mechanics of the pentathlon in antiquity, I offer for your viewing at this time a film narrative on the subject, produced in 1972 for the American Broadcasting Company by Erich Segal, Yale University classics scholar and well known author of Love Story. Even though the film is markedly incorrect in many aspects of its portrayal of the event, few will argue with the thought that it is indeed an aesthetic production and of value as a point of departure for further study and investigation.

SHOWING OF THE FILM

The Jump

The jump is probably the particular sub-event of the pentathlon which has aroused the most controversy and speculation in terms of scholarly efforts aimed at determining exactly how the event may have been carried out. However, if the archaeological and literary evidence, pertinent to Greek pentathlon jumping, is studied in combination, then there are a few very valid assumptions one can make.

From the artifacts of archaeological recovery we know for certain that the jumping event was always performed in a manner which saw the jumper employing a set of hand weights called halteres. Halteres, while they quite probably were also used in the gymnasium as an ancient form of dumbell apparatus, were put into use during the jump in such a way as to provide extra impetus for one's flight, as well as to help the jumper come to a distinct and definite landing in the skamma (landing pit).

From repeated references in the literature and countless depictions on Greek pottery, we know also that the jumping event was carried out to the music of the flute or diaulos player. This fact may seem meaningless to many, but is, I believe, extremely important in the final analysis.

The literary evidence, although scant indeed, does provide some very valuable clues to the solution of our dilemma. For instance, it is relative to the jumping event of the ancient pentathlon that one of the very few references to quality of Greek performance is left for modern man to contemplate. I am referring, of course, to that well known epigram which describes the leaping and discus throwing abilities (or perhaps a lack of ability in the latter case) of Phayllus of Croton, who, in the first half of the 5th century, won two victories in the pentathlon of the Pythian Games at Delphi. The epigram referred to above reported that

Phayllus ". . . jumped five over fifty feet but threw the discus five short of a hundred." The prodigious leap was reported to have carried Phayllus five feet beyond the skamma, at which point he suffered a broken leg (both legs, if you believe Segal) from his impact on the hard ground. Phayllus' performance thus surpassed the only other recorded pentathlon jump that we know of; a 52 foot effort in the 7th century by one Chionis of Sparta.*

I feel quite sure that common consensus among us would reveal that even with the use of jumping weights (articles which contemporary jumpers would certainly view as more of a hindrance than a help in modern longjumping or even triplejumping technique) single leaps of such distances recorded by Chionis and Phayllus are impossible. Two explanations are then possible. Either the ancient Greek jump was not a single jump or the records of Phayllus and Chionis are pure fiction.

In regard to the latter point, there are those who pass off the Phayllus epigram as fraudulent, such as Durant, who states: "we must not believe all the Greeks have told us" (Durant, p.214), and the eminent scholar, E. Norman Gardiner, who believed that the Greek jump was probably a single jump and that the recorded 52 feet of Chionis was probably a simple mistake for 22 feet, which is the reading of the Armenian Latin text (Gardiner, p. 309). Personally, I am not quite so quick to dismiss the recorded Phayllus and Chionis leaps in such summary fashion. The evidence, as I perceive it, points to the pentathlon jumping event being not a single jump, but rather a multiple jump. The type of multiple jump which best satisfies the pertinent literary and archaeological evidence is,

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*Ebert presents some interesting data to hypothesize that because of differences in the length of the Attican foot vs. the Olympic foot Chionis actually leaped farther than did Phayllus.

I believe, a triple or quadruple jump. Why?

1. A reference in classical Greek literature points to the jump being broken into a series of movements. Themistius, in his commentary on Aristotle's Physics, cites the jump of the pentathlon as an example of motion which is not continuous. A single jump is certainly an example of continuous motion from take-off to landing. A triple or quadruple jump, on the other hand, is necessarily broken into quite distinctive parts and, therefore, is an example of motion which is discontinuous.
2. The Greek word for take-off board or starting mark was bater. An encyclopaedist of the 1st century A.D. defined the bater as "the edge from which they make the first jump." Still another encyclopaedist offered a definition of the bater as "the middle from which having jumped, they jumped again."

There is good reason to believe that the grooved starting stones for the footraces were also used as the take-off point in the jumping event. If this was so then the preliminary run for the jumping exercise could not have been nearly as long as in either the long jump or the triple jump event of today. In fact, in most early Greek stadia the distance would not usually have exceeded twenty yards. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the approach movement was one more closely resembling that of the modern high jump. A long approach run carrying halteres weighing from two to ten pounds would definitely detract from performance. A distance of at least thirty yards is used by modern long jumpers to perform their single leaps. In fact, the modern single jump is more

dependent on speed at point of take-off than any other single factor. That is why modern long jumpers are often described as "sprinters who can jump," in much the same way that hurdlers are sometimes referred to as "jumpers who can sprint." In multiple jumps the premium on speed decreases over that necessary for the single jump, and increases on such factors as timing, spring, and coordination.

Harris perceived the jump as probably a triple jump; that is until Beamon long jumped slightly over 29 feet in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico. He then changed his stance to embrace the concept of a double jump, arguing forcefully that such a prodigious leap as that of Phayllus could well have been a "Beamon-like" jump in ancient Greek athletic history- an epitome performance bringing together in complete harmony all those variables which make for a truly outstanding athletic performance. In other words, the most classic of all performances, achieved after well over three centuries of skill performance development in the event. A plausible but still doubtful argument, in my opinion.

Ebert, the German, argues that the jumping event was an exercise embracing five standing long jumps (Ebert, Zum Pentathlon der Antike). The literary evidence could just as well support Ebert's hypothesis, but the vase paintings of jumpers undermine the credibility of his thesis. The jumpers are always pictured carrying the halteres in a running approach, an in-flight position, or in a feet together landing with halteres still in hand. The traditional starting position of Greek runners has often been construed to be a standing jump starting position. The mistake is natural, but the real evidence lies in the presence of halteres in the jumper's hands. If no halteres are present then the exercise is most probably not a jump.

The literature points to the fact that the landing pit was constructed to accommodate a leap of 50 feet, and this is further supported by Phayllus' legacy of having leaped five feet beyond the skamma. In considering a multiple jump Segal sneers, "where might Phayllus have taken his ensuing jumps from, the sand?" He could have taken them from solid ground with the last jump being made into the soft earth of the skamma just as is done in modern times. A mistake often made by analysts of the jump event is that certainly the pit could have been far less than 50 feet long and still accommodate a 50 foot leap.

The Discus Throw

The one event of the pentathlon probably serving the least military importance was the discus. Nevertheless, the military motif was present to some degree in that the movements carried out in the event, as well as the training exercises necessary to successful performances, definitely had military connotations relative to fitness. Throwing heavy weights built both strength and power.

The discus event is also a pentathlon sub-event which has encountered trouble relative to modern investigation. Interpretations of Myron's diskobolos formed the unfortunate basis for the "Hellenic" style of throwing present in the early editions of the modern Olympic Games, even to throwing from a raised and confining platform base such as that the statue rests upon. Throwing the discus from a small ring in a freestyle "whirling" motion was a distinct improvement but still remained unlike the throw of the ancient Greeks.

In Homer's funeral games the discus was a separate event, but in historic times we hear of it only as one of the sub-events of the

pentathlon, except in rare instances at minor festivals where it may have been a separate event in itself, such as at Olbia, a Milesian colony in Scythia.

Segal's pictorial interpretation of the mechanics of the discus throw is quite good, especially when one looks closely at that style and technique used by Rafer Johnson. Either a fixed, or more probably, a three or four step approach was made by the thrower along the course of the balbis.

Controversy does arise over how far the Greeks could throw the discus. Although various disci of different size and weight (from 6" to 12" in diameter and from 3 to 15 pounds in weight) have been reclaimed it is probable that the disci used by men in the festival competitions were not too much in variance in both size and shape with the modern discus. The literary evidence, which is our sole guide to performance, is indeed scant. We know from our notes on Phayllus that he threw the discus "five short of 100 feet." Somehow, this phrase has been interpreted by modern writers to present the belief that Phayllus was one of the most proficient discus throwers of his day. We know for certain that he was a most excellent jumper and that he was a very fast runner for his time. It is not often that an outstanding jumper and runner is also a formidable contestant in the "weight" events. The premium is on strength and power, not on speed and spring. Thus, Phayllus' 95 foot discus throw was probably a mediocre or inferior performance, rather than one of exceptional brilliance. Then too, there is reference by Philostratus to the Ghost of Protesilaus (1st Greek to fall at Troy) making a throw of more than 100 cubits (150 feet) with a discus twice as heavy as that used at Olympia, a passage which alludes to the fact that throws of over 150 feet with the Olympic discus

might have been the order of the day.

However, the discus event of the pentathlon remains a mystery in many ways. Yet to be proven but existing as the best interpretations of the event are those which are aptly demonstrated by Segal in his film.

The Javelin Throw

It is odd that the javelin throw, perhaps the most militarily oriented of all Greek athletic exercises, never attained the status of a major event in Greek athletic festivals. For the most part we see it only as one of the "triad" events of the pentathlon.* It is true, however, that at certain festivals (the Panathenea, for instance) the javelin throw was carried out as a separate event.

The ancient literature pertinent to athletic javelin throwing is extremely limited. This fact is certainly perplexing to the investigator, particularly when one views the abundance of archaeological evidence depicting various aspects of the javelin throwing exercise. The Greeks threw the javelin in much the same manner as the modern thrower except for the fact that a "throwing thong" called an amentum was used. The javelin amentum effected the same principle of missile delivery as the sling, catapult, and even the rotary motion imparted to a projectile by a rifle barrel.

Segal's interpretation of javelin throwing is correct insofar as the javelin being thrown from a launching area called a balbis. His presentation of Johnson's and Toomey's approach and delivery are also most creditable in terms of research interpretation. At that point, however,

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*Triad events were those indigenous only to the pentathlon - the jump, discus and javelin.

Segal's dedication to in-depth study of the event takes on disastrous proportions. The amenta we see on the javelins used in the film are wide, strap-like appendages, and are attached to the javelin in a permanent manner in such a way as to prohibit "unwinding" motion thus negating any rotary action to the shaft, one of the chief advantages to be gained from using the amentum. Vase paintings show quite clearly that amenta were "thong-like" rather than "strap-like." In most cases the amentum departed from the javelin during its flight, although it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the javelin sometimes reached its destination with the amentum still attached (ancient Greek hunting scenes depict this phenomena occurring). In no way, however, can I agree with particular of my colleagues, that the amentum remained in the hand of the thrower after the javelin had been launched into space. Harris' experiments most definitely prove otherwise (Harris, p. 94).

Of even more concern than Segal's treatment of the amentum is his scholarship regarding the basic purpose of the throw, i.e. accuracy vs. distance. Segal has mistaken the javelin accuracy throwing exercises of the ephebos (military cadet) and/or the javelin competitions in the military division of the Panathenean Games for the javelin sub-event of the pentathlon. Military javelin exercises were dedicated towards developing accuracy (the target being referred to as a compter). Indeed, Attican vases vividly portray this accuracy exercise in Panathenean competition, but with epheboi as competitors, each mounted on horseback and garbed in the traditional broad brimmed hat and loose tunic, rather than the naked pentathletes of the Crown festivals. The javelin of the pentathlon was thrown for distance. Lucien's remarks give full credence

to this fact (Lucian, Anacharsis, 27, as cited by Gardiner, p. 355).

The number of throws that an ancient pentathlon javelin performer may have been allowed remains open to question. We are provided with no really conclusive evidence in this regard. Left to conjecture, also, are the distances the ancient javelin throwers may have achieved. The fact that ancient Greek athletic javelins were lighter than their modern counterparts, coupled with the results of experiments by several contemporary investigators (Gardiner, Harris, Juthner), has shown that the amentum can improve distance considerably and leads me to support Harris' contention that throws were often made in excess of 300 feet.

The Stade Run

It is difficult for anyone to criticize an interpretation of the stade event of the pentathlon. The exercise, perhaps the most simple of all Greek athletic events, was merely a sprint from a starting point at one end of the stadium, to a finishing line at the stadium's far end. Segal's film, and indeed other interpretations of the event, pose some interesting questions. Among the most prominent are: (1) the methods of starting, and (2) the position of the stade event in the pentathlon program, relative to the other four sub-events.

Stade runners used a variety of starting devices to help speed them on their way or to insure an equal opportunity at the start. In primitive times a simple line scratched in the earth sufficed as the starting mark. Later, a long row of sills set in the ground, each with parallel grooves for foot positioning, served as the starting line. This type of starting device was the most common in the major festival stadia. In even more contemporary times, certainly by the 5th century, a form of

starting gate called a husplex was used. There is also some evidence to suggest that at least one festival site (Epidaurus) may have used "toe holes" as starting aids.

The archaeological evidence is quite consistent in its depiction of the human body's position at the start of a running race. This position is one in which the body is upright and facing directly down the racecourse. Both knees are flexed slightly and both arms are extended outward in front of the body, palms down. There is absolutely no source, literary or archaeological, which supports Segal's positioning of his runners in the manner shown--leaning over, arms hanging, side to the running course (similar to that pose taken by modern runners at the start of long distance races).

Segal has chosen Gardiner's conclusion (quite by accident if his bibliography is evidence) pertinent to the position of the stade in the order of sub-events. That particular conclusion places the stade race as the first event of the pentathlon, followed by the "triad events"--jump, discus, javelin--and finally, by wrestling. Vase paintings give little insight into this dilemma but the ancient literature better supports the proposition that the triad events were first, followed by the stade, and lastly, wrestling. Authenticity is given to that particular order by Harris (Harris, pp. 79-80), despite Gardiner's elaborations otherwise (Gardiner, pp. 362-364

Wrestling

Beyond any doubt, the wrestling event, if still needed to determine a winner, occurred last on the pentathlon program. The event was carried out in upright perspective with the ultimate purpose being to throw one's

opponent to the ground, most probably in such a way as to have his shoulders or back contact the sand. If a competitor landed in a position other than that described above he returned to his feet and the match continued. How many legal or allowed throws it took to win a match is debatable. Gardiner speculates on a match of three out of five falls; Harris, two out of three. Each assumption is based on interpretation of the Greek literary term "to treble," or to "win a treble." Perhaps Gardiner's three out of five fall conclusion is the more valid, especially in light of Seneeca's statement, "a Wrestler thrice thrown loses the prize" (Luctator ter abjectus perdidit palmam, as cited by Gardiner, p. 380). At any rate, Segal has Toomey and Johnson locked in a three out of five fall struggle, perfectly in keeping with reasonable interpretation.

Both Gardiner and Harris present sound evidence that wrestlers either sanded their own oiled bodies before competition or dusted those of their opponents with a fine powder imported from Egypt. Both exercises were carried out to ensure a satisfactory grip on otherwise slippery torsos. Segal's staging of the wrestling match pays no attention to this ritual.

In most other aspects of the pentathlon wrestling event shown in the film there is very little one could argue with except that there seems to be a larger consensus among scholars that the wrestling was carried out on a normal, sandy ground surface rather than in a churned up pit as depicted by Segal.

Summary and Conclusion

There are other points for which Segal can be taken to task in his portrayal of the ancient pentathlon. One of these is his interpretation as to how the Greeks viewed the event in terms of its importance in the overall

program of festival athletic events. To state that general Greek feeling for the event followed after Aristotle's personal feelings is a most dangerous assumption. It is true, as Segal states, that Aristotle viewed the pentathlon as the epitome of all-around athletic excellence; but, on the other hand and certainly conversely, Plato saw the event as a contest for "second raters," or those individuals who were not quite good enough to be a top performer in any of the singular events. Plato's thoughts are both substantiated and weakened by the literary record--substantiated by the myth of Peleus (Gardiner, p. 362), which some scholars are inclined to believe formed the very idea for the development of such an athletic exercise, and weakened by the fact that the major ancient festival records are rife with instances of athletes having won major events on the program and subsequently entered and won the pentathlon. To match the wisdom of Aristotle against that of Plato as representative of general Greek feeling on the subject presents a very narrow viewpoint. Greek festival managers, at least from the 4th century on, were moved to attach prize monies or awards to the various events in respect to their popular appeal, and, in this regard, consistently awarded the pentathlon the smallest amount. I feel that this fact is a much better barometer in determining the pentathlon's importance in Greek athletics.

Continuing, Segal is erroneous in making the statement that the Greeks never gave any prize beyond that for first place. Again, the record distinctly shows us that what may have been true for a short period of Grecian history (8th to 6th century) certainly did not remain a consistent practice. Prize monies and utilitarian items awarded for finishes beyond first place were the rule rather than the exception from the 4th century onward.

Investigators of the pentathlon have long been perplexed as to how the winner of the event was determined. Some interesting hypotheses have been advanced. German writers, in particular, have attached much importance to the "myth of Jason" involving Peleus, arguing that all entrants competed in all five events and that final victory depended on how well an athlete placed in each event in respect to his fellow competitors. The literature, however, supports a viewpoint that competitors were eliminated from the event as each sub-event was carried out. The ancient literary phrase "winner in the first triad" points to the possibility that an athlete winning three of the five events became the pentathlon champion. Gardiner (Gardiner, pp. 365-371), Harris (Harris, pp. 77-80), and Ebert (Ebert, pp. 16-34) all present interesting theories supporting the "three out of five" concept but with modifications to one another's thesis. One fact is certain: the pentathlon occurred during the latter stages of the festival programs. A system of scoring to determine a winner could not have been too complicated or drawn out or the event could not have been held in the limited amount of time alloted. It is doubtful that a system of scoring was developed for the ancient pentathlon as it has been for its modern counterpart, the decathlon.

From my comments I have seemed to be most critical of Segal's work. I do not deny that I am just that. However, I do recognize the value of his work to sports historians and their students. If Segal, a person of proven scholarship in classics, had but consulted the works of Gardiner and Harris, both well known and stated by him to be the foremost scholar/writers in the English language on the subject of ancient Greek athletics, his overall effort might well have been applauded vigorously by my

colleagues and me. Instead, Segal chose to consult the works of Kieran and Daley and the Poole's, among others, all highly suspect in their scholarly character. The end result is to settle for a field goal when a touchdown might have been achieved-to draw an analogy from Segal's personal review of Harris' Sport in Greece and Rome (Segal, New York Times Book Review, 1973). If some are alienated by my criticism, I am sure that whimsical smiles flit across the countenances of Harold Harris and E. Norman Gardiner as they review these Proceedings from their observation chairs in the Celestial Kingdom of classical scholarship.

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